

The Mission of My Church: “A great persecution.”

Focus Passage: Acts 7:54–8:8

Larger Context – Acts 6:8–7:53 ... Stephen was one of the seven Hellenistic Jews chosen in Acts 6 to oversee the food distribution to the Hellenistic Jewish widows. He was filled with grace and power and performed signs and wonders among the people, taking advantage of opportunities to preach the gospel. In one of those preaching occasions, his audience became enraged and accused him of blaspheming the Law of Moses, leading to the stoning we read about in our focus passage.

Other Passages Referenced: Genesis 1:1; Psalm 23; Isaiah 64:1; Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21; 22:69; Romans 5:3–5

Comments to Leaders

- In the application section, you have a great opportunity to sharpen one another in connecting the dots between major events in the Bible’s historical and redemptive narrative. I encourage you to make sure you work through question 3 in the Allow the Word to Speak section and note the major characters. Then, starting with Abraham, ask the group to pitch in their commentaries on how we might weave Abraham’s story into a presentation of God’s promises and the good news of their fulfillment in Jesus. Move on to Isaac ... Jacob ... etc.
- Make sure to address the issue of facing suffering according to what we feel or what God’s word teaches.
- This Sunday’s sermon and passage provide great reinforcement for 2019’s annual focus on the Bible and seeing Jesus throughout the Scriptures. You may also want to direct people to the E100 series and study helps [here](#).

Sermon Recap

The Big Idea of the sermon based on Stephen’s speech and martyrdom was, “Say what you’ve seen and suffer like Jesus so others can see.” After declaring how Jesus was the fulfillment of God’s promises throughout the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures, Stephen accused his Jewish audience of generally rejecting God’s word and Jesus. As the angry crowd rushed to stone Stephen, he saw the heavens opened and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God the Father (Acts 7:55–56).

The heavens had not been opened since Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, after rebelling against God. God, in His mercy, closed off access to His presence in the garden so that Adam and Eve did not eat from the Tree of Life and live eternally in their corrupted state. Isaiah 64 offers a prayer that the heavens might be opened once again. In Jesus’ baptism, heaven opened.

Jesus made open access to heaven possible through His sacrifice on the cross and resurrection. He took upon Himself the penalty we deserved that we might receive the eternal life that He deserved. Stephen said what he saw. When we fail to see how the heavens have been opened to us through Jesus, we are unable to witness about that truth to others.

Stephen had clearly learned to suffer by seeing Jesus’ suffering on the cross. Both Jesus and Stephen looked to God’s word and prayed for God to forgive their executioners. “Forgive” means “to release” or “not hold against.” What could the world learn about God’s forgiveness if we released those who caused our suffering?

When persecution came against the Church in Acts 8, the Church scattered except the apostles who stayed in Jerusalem. The gospel spread through the scattered followers of Jesus who said what they saw and often suffered like Jesus so that others would see heaven opened by Jesus. Stephen's vision is the only mention in the New Testament of Jesus standing at the right hand of God. Perhaps Jesus was standing to welcome the martyr Stephen into heaven.

What invitation do you need to accept so that you can see heaven opened? What time do you need to carve out in order to see Jesus standing at the right hand of God the Father? What is shaping our response to suffering—feelings or God's word? Are we forgiving others amid our suffering?

Group Gathering

Group Check-in — Care, Celebration, Encouragement (About 1/3 of meeting time)

1. Informal conversation to allow individuals to catch up with one another.
2. Ask if anyone would share how they've been hearing and obeying God's direction.

Allow the Word to Speak — Be Hearers of the Word (About 1/3 of meeting time)

READ Acts 6:8–8:8

1. What from the passage or sermon was most impactful to you?
2. Were you left with any questions or confusion about the passage or sermon?
3. Acts 7:54 says, "When they heard *these things*, they were infuriated." What things did Stephen say that upset them so? Review Acts 7:1–53 and list the names of the Old Testament figures Stephen spoke of along with the importance he gave them.
4. As Stephen was being stoned, how did he reflect Jesus at the time of His crucifixion?
5. What roles did Saul, who was first introduced in Acts 7:58, play in Acts 7:58–8:3?
6. Where was Philip first introduced in Acts?

Put the Word into Practice — Be Doers of the Word (About 1/3 of meeting time)

1. In 53 verses, Stephen gives a concise survey of God's promises and redemption narrative from the Old Testament leading up to and including Jesus. Rehearse in your mind or write on paper, how you would explain the biblical narrative of from Abraham to Jesus as promise and fulfillment of God's promises. This will be a good exercise for your group to do together, telling God's story from Abraham to Jesus with the characters in Acts 7.
2. Imagine in your mind how you might model Jesus if you were to suffer mistreatment or attacks for faithfully sharing the good news of Jesus. How would your envisioned response compare to your natural response if you were not consciously trying to model Jesus?

The Big Question: What do you sense God's Spirit saying to you and what concrete action will you take in response? Share your answer with the group or another trusted Christian and ask them to pray for you.

What We Hope Members Glean from the Passage

1. No set answer.
2. No set answer.
3. Stephen argued that the Jewish people has rejected the Law of Moses. More specifically he said, "'You stiff-necked *people* and uncircumcised in hearts and in *your** ears! You constantly resist the Holy Spirit! As your fathers *did*, so also *do* you! ⁵² Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand about the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and

murderers you have now become, ⁵³ *you* who received the law by directions of angels and have not observed *it!*" (Acts 7:51-53) Abraham ... Isaac ... Jacob ... Joseph ... Moses ... Joshua ... David ... Solomon ... The Righteous One (Jesus)

4. As he was dying, Stephen said, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" as Jesus had said, "Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit." Stephen also cried out, "do not hold this sin against them!" just as Jesus asked the Father to forgive those who were crucifying Him.
5. Saul tended to the coats of those who were stoning Stephen. Later, he "was attempting to destroy the church. Entering house after house, he dragged off both men and women *and* delivered *them* to prison" (Acts 8:3).
6. Philip, like Stephen, was one of the seven men set apart to oversee the food distribution to Hellenistic widows in Acts 6.

SERVICE OPPORTUNITIES: Click [here](#) for some good opportunities.